A foreigner at Dia da Marinha do Tejo

By Martine van Lier – 2017 - 06 - 21

To my great surprise we, as foreigners, had the great pleasure and honour to be invited to join the Portuguese Dia da Marinha do Tejo in Lisboã - Lisbon, which was held on the 17th of June 2017.

Quite a long way from home in the Netherlands, but it turned out to be very much worth the effort. The ceremony for the preservation of maritime skills and traditional sailing ships typical for the river Tejo (Tagus) is really, really impressive. Apart from the excellent organisation, which is an example for all other maritime heritage events, this celebration of maritime pride and self-esteem also contains valuable lessons for everyone who is concerned with using maritime heritage and transferring it to a younger generation.
First a short intermezzo, meant for the orientation of foreigners: Even without a festival it is a great pleasure to visit Lisboä, the beautiful capital of Portugal, situated at the river Tejo.

The river is more than 1,000 kilometers long and originates from the high plains of the Sierra de Albarracín in Spain. It is the longest river of the Iberian peninsula. After passing Toledo in Spain the river runs for 280 kilometers through Portugal and flows into the sea just after Lisboä. Thanks to the Tejo and the shipping traffic and trade, Lisboä developed as an important and prosperous harbour city. The Tejo is also an important life vein for multiple towns at its banks, for irrigation and for electricity generation. Until 1966, when the big Ponte do 25 Abril in Lisboä was opened, as the first bridge over the broad part of the river Tejo, all transport from the one shore of the river to the other, was made by ships. Hundreds and hundreds of ships were helpful with the connection and communication between the northern and the southern part of Portugal. Quite an achievement.

And now for all readers: Back to the beginning of the Dia da Marinha do Tejo! Early in the morning of Saturday June 17th, on what was going to be one of the hottest days in spring in Portugal ever, dozens of traditional sailing ships of the river Tejo sail to the big Praça do Comércio in Lisboä, lower their sails and drop their anchors. Close to each other the ships form a respectable collection of typical Portuguese maritime heritage.

All the traditional ships are made of wood and are sailing ships, of different types and sizes, but always elegant and joyfully multicoloured. The smaller ships have usually lateen sails, the bigger ones are gaff-rigged. Very distinctive for these ships are the high stems and the use of bright colours, graceful characters and beautiful flower patterns.

The decorations on the ships are typical for this region and all those elements have a historical meaning. For instance: the colours used on the top of the mast indicate the town where the ship belongs.

In front of the Praça is posted a frigate of the Portuguese Navy as a watchkeeper. But not only that. The Navy also appears to play an active role in the ceremony of the Dia da Marinha do Tejo.
The naval officers sail alongside the traditional ships with fast inflatable boats to collect all the boatsmen and crew and bring them ashore.

And there they are welcomed by the Navy orchestra playing maritime music.

At the riverside of the Praça do Comércio the skippers are welcomed and they all sit around a very wide set-up quadrangular of tables, to form not a Round but a Square Table Meeting. In the middle of the square lie two traditional sails on the ground. On the tables are plates with the names of every ship and every nautical organization active in the preservation of the
The official meeting begins with a welcome to all the skippers and officials, by Professor Fernando Carvalho Rodrigues in the name of the festival organization, the mayors of the Tejo-towns and the head of the Navy. Then there are speeches for the people attending the Square Table Meeting about the great importance of the preservation of the maritime heritage of the Tejo for the people, the cities and the country of Portugal. I must admit that unfortunately my Portuguese is not well enough to understand every word of the speeches … my sincere apologies for this shortcoming.
Then the atmosphere is ready for the main part of the Square Table Meeting: every skipper is asked by the festival organisation to step forward and to sign the big Register of the *Dia da Marinha do Tejo*. The signing means that the skipper promises to take care of the good maintenance and the presentation to the public of the ship for at least the coming year, until the next *Dia da Marinha do Tejo* will take place. In exchange for that the President of Portugal, as a representative for the festival organization, promises to give the skippers a grant as a sustainment to the preservation of the traditional fleet.
The skippers all pass by President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, all giving him a unique photograph, painting or statue of their ship, and are warmly greeted by him, as he gives them a special flag as a confirmation for their mutual promises.

After the Signing Ceremony is finished, the President gives his warm and special thanks to the festival organization, the skippers and the assistance of the Navy. In a heartwarming speech, he praises the importance of the festival *Dia da Marinha do Tejo* for the presentation, the valorisation and the dignifying of the maritime heritage and the impact of that on the inhabitants of the city of Lisboã and the other rivertowns alongside the Tejo and of the country of Portugal.

The ceremony is attended by the whole Portuguese press, including the newspapers and the national radio and television company. Directly after the ceremony all Portuguese people were able to witness the mutual promises from the skippers and the festival organisation in front of the President of Portugal and his encouraging words.

A special part of the ceremony is the baptizing of the President, as a special gratitude for his attention to the *Dia da Marinha do Tejo*. He received the long black skippers hat, that is made to protect the head of the skipper against heat and cold, and that at the same time is designed to preserve his purse and tobacco. With this gesture, the skippers festival honours the President as 'someone who really has a maritime heart'.
The ceremony is officially finished by everyone standing up and looking at the riverside and at the traditional Tejo fleet lying there, while the Navy salutes and the Marine Orchestra plays the national hymn and everybody sings the famous words.

For us as foreigners - and as representatives from the European Maritime Heritage umbrella organisation – this ceremony of the Dia da Marinha do Tejo was very impressive, and also informative and promising. The symbolism of this festival is very special, meaningful and powerful. What can other countries, maritime heritage organisations and heritage events learn from this splendid celebration?

✓ The success of an event need not be measured only by attendance numbers. Most events, and also a lot of maritime events, are rated by sponsors, who usually judge the success of the event by counting the amount of public. But maybe the amount of public is not always an appropriate criterion for the impact of an event. The ceremony of the Dia da Marinha do Tejo is attended only by a few hundred people. And on purpose not more than that. For in this way the event can be a real celebration, an intimate gathering of initiated people who promise each other to work together on the preservation of their mutual maritime heritage. Through the eyes of the press, the ceremony is very transparent to the public and the promises can be seen by everyone.

✓ The event combines presentation and co-operation. Heritage events are of course an important opportunity for the proud owners of cultural-historical valuable objects to present their heritage to the public. They have so much knowledge about their heritage objects, that they tend to overburden their public with elaborate expert information. The Dia da Marinha do Tejo shows us another approach route. It is also very interesting to hear what government officials as mayors, the navy commander and even the country’s president think about the importance of safeguarding and preserving maritime heritage. A mutual promise of co-operation by helping each other to fulfill their shared task is a powerful symbol. Year by year.
✓ The event shows the recognition of Portugal as a maritime country. Portugal has the advantage to be a country with huge maritime possibilities, a long coastline, sailable rivers and a lot of harbour towns. These are not only important for fishery and transport, but also for recreation and tourism as a growing service for the Portuguese economy. Tourism and recreation flourishes by attractiveness and distinctiveness. By being different as everywhere else, by being inalienable specific and characterising for a certain territory. Ships belong to Portugal as sardines belong to the menu.

✓ The event shows the power of investing in heritage. According to advertisement, ‘renewed formulas’ are always better. That may be true sometimes, but it is not the whole truth. Proven recipes can be very useful, and profitable too. That goes for instance for built heritage. And Portugal recognizes that. The historic rivertowns at the borders of the Tejo combine their cultural treasures and harbour architecture with new functions and new developments, in a smart way, that consolidates the buildings and strengthens the heritage qualities. The same goes for the maritime heritage of the Tejo. Investing in safeguarding the colourful traditional
wooden sailing ships and reusing them to sail with visitors may cost money at first, but on the long term will invigorate the characteristics and attractiveness of the region, and that pays off for all the people of Portugal.

✓ The event shows that youngsters are the hope and future of the nation. The Dia da Marinha do Tejo is not only a collection of historical ships, but also a gathering of valuable maritime know-how and expertise. Of course, this knowledge is built up in many years of using these ships for fishing and transport, by people who reach the age of handing over their expertise to the younger generation. The local governments of the rivertowns along the Tejo recognised this in time and took their measures. They followed the wise advice of the famous French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” So, each town adopted a small sailing ship, not to flatter potential business partners as is often seen, but to sail with the real VIP’s, the primary school children of Lisboa, Cascais, Seixal, Barreiro, Montijo, Alhandra and Vila Franca de Xira.

They give the youngsters the opportunity to get inspired by sailing the river and the sea. To travel and to meet the unknown, to learn from the unexpected and to bring discoveries, be it only internal, back home. And above all, they are given the chance to see and feel the beauty and elegance of the Portuguese maritime heritage. Now is the time for them to be curious and willing to learn the magic skills of sailing and maintaining traditional sailing ships. Significantly, the youth sail training ship of the capital Lisboa is called ‘Esperança’, Hope.

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